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Plan envisions bright future for Palmdale

Report anticipates airport will be twice as busy as ONT by 2030

By JIM SKEEN STAFF WRITER

PALMDALE - A transportation master plan prepared by the **Southern California Association of Governments** envisions Palmdale Regional Airport serving as many as 12.8 million passengers by the year 2030, making it about twice as busy as Ontario International Airport is now.

According to "Destination 2030," the draft 2004 regional transportation plan for a six-county region, Southern California air travel should not concentrate at Los Angeles International Airport, but rather spread out to Palmdale and Ontario.

"The preferred aviation plan attempts to distribute long-haul and international service to suburban airports, particularly Palmdale," the report said. "With international service established at

Palmdale and Ontario airports, the region would have a balanced system of three international airports, similar to the San Francisco Bay area and New York regions."

The plan calls for Los Angeles World Airports, the city of Los Angeles department that runs Palmdale as well as LAX and Ontario, to initiate discussions with airlines to bring start-up commuter and short-haul service to Palmdale in the 2006-2010 time frame.

Just last week, Las Vegas-based Scenic Airlines announced its plans to start offering 14 flights between Palmdale and Las Vegas, using twin-engine propeller-driven planes, on March 1.

Between 2010 to 2015, LAWA should initiate discussions to bring long-haul and international service to Palmdale, according to the plan.

In the 2015-2030 time frame, construction of international terminal facilities would take place at Palmdale, and LAWA would complete agreements to begin long-haul and international service, according to the plan.

The plan also envisions high-speed rail links connecting Los Angeles International Airport and Palmdale Regional Airport being built in the 2015-2030 time frame. The LAX-Palmdale link would be part of a network of some 250-plus miles of rail line throughout Southern California.

The plan provides basic policy and program framework for long-term investment in the region's transportation system. Transportation projects competing for federal and state transportation grants must be in keeping with the plan.

Operated by the Los Angeles airports department, the Palmdale airport has a terminal building and land leased at Air Force Plant 42. Under an agreement with the Air Force, Plant 42 can be used by civilian airlines offering as many as 50 flights a day, and there are provisions to expand to 400 flights a day.

But airlines have not wanted to fly out of Palmdale, preferring to add flights at LAX and Ontario.

Commuter airlines United Express, America West and SkyWest operated out of Palmdale in the 1990s -- sometimes two airlines at a time. United Express, the last commercial carrier at the site, pulled out of Palmdale in February 1998.

With the Scenic Airlines announcement, airport supporters said they were hopeful additional airlines could be attracted to Palmdale.

"I think the industry is starting to recover from 9-11," Palmdale Mayor Jim Ledford said last week. "People are starting to inquire."

Also feasible is the total amount of traffic by 2030, Ledford said. However, he said, the idea of international traffic is doubtful. The joint-use agreement that permits the operation of the Palmdale Regional Airport does not allow for international flights.

"I don't think that plan shows knowledge of the joint-use agreement," Ledford said. "I don't think that (international service) is feasible or that it will be embraced by the Air Force."

Larry Chimbole, Palmdale's first mayor and an advocate of the development of the airport for more than 30 years, said he thought the SCAG passenger numbers were not too ambitious. Chimbole said he believed developing Palmdale became a more popular idea with planners after proposals to establish an airport at a former military base at El Toro fell apart because of heated opposition.

"When that fell through, almost by default they recognized the potential of Palmdale," Chimbole said.

Chimbole said he anticipates slow, steady growth for any air service coming to the region.

"Any service, other than a 24-seater going to LAX at ridiculous prices, is a step in the right direction," Chimbole said.

Advocates of the Palmdale airport are awaiting a \$1.9 million master plan being prepared for the airport's development by a contractor for LAWA. That master plan should be ready by summer.

The plan is to include conceptual plans for airport development and land use; forecasts for airport demand; an airport layout plan and terminal area plan; and an environmental impact report.

LAWA spokesman Paul Haney said the department was not far enough along in the master plan process to comment on the SCAG plan.

In a study commissioned by Los Angeles County, the consulting firm Tri-Star Marketing stated Palmdale could support a profitable passenger service linking the Antelope Valley with western cities like Las Vegas, Dallas, Denver and the San Francisco Bay area.

The market area from which the Palmdale airport could draw -- about 600,000 people, taking in Santa Clarita as well as the Antelope Valley -- is large enough to produce 1 million to 1.5 million airline passengers a year, the report added. Airports in comparably sized markets average 26 jet flights and 18 commuter flights daily, the report said.

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